



TIDBITS

tips and helpful links

Differentiating Instruction Providing Access for All to Arizona's Common Core Standards

Arizona's Common Core Standards present new challenges for teachers of students with special needs, and with those challenges comes an opportunity to assess our current practices, our strengths, and the shifts we'll need to make as we move into implementation. Utilizing UDL (Universal Design for Learning) as an instructional method will help all teachers create lessons that are flexible enough to accommodate a variety of learning styles. Becoming a UDL expert is a natural outgrowth of working with special needs populations, enabling you to serve as a valuable resource person during team lesson planning.

A second strategy familiar to special education staff is RTI (Response to Intervention) which identifies learning difficulties early on and provides focused lessons designed to target those identified areas and quickly bring them up to grade level. These are just two of the many areas of expertise that special education personnel bring to the team as teachers begin to choose materials, design lesson plans, and determine measures of student progress. These strategies will prove to be beneficial in all classrooms—to be used by all students—regardless of ability.

Although districts will be providing professional development on the new standards, the real understanding will come as teachers begin to select materials and plan lessons. Special education teachers need to be a part of these grade level team meetings on a regular basis as they grapple with interpretation of standards. It is here that a common understanding will be established, where special education teachers will learn what's expected of their students as they participate with their peers in general education, and where they can advocate for their students in terms of lesson delivery, activities, and assessment.



Now more than ever it's critical for students with special needs to receive their instruction in the general education setting to the greatest extent possible.

The new standards demand complex lesson designs, combining reading and math with writing, listening, speaking, and language development. Additional shifts may need to be considered, such as the allocation of time spent on critical subject areas, in order to provide the time for students with special needs to have sufficient instruction with modeling and practice to master the material. The changes demanded by the new standards give all educators an opportunity to re-think how we do business, redefine our roles, and develop a vision for a world class educational system that serves all students equally well.

New Frontiers in Teaching

One of the most interesting innovations in UDL is the use of virtual reality and computer simulations to enhance student learning experiences. A student might find himself flying through space in a virtual solar system, observing the Constitutional Convention in 1787, or conducting observations of the growth of microorganisms under different lab conditions—all of which create a highly stimulating learning environment taking students beyond the walls of the traditional classroom and offering first hand immersion experiences. To find out more about these exciting learning options, see:

http://aim.cast.org/learn/historyarchive/backgroundpapers/virtual_simulations_udl

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With collaboration being an essential element in implementing the new standards, it's important to explore the benefits of co-teaching. This is a win-win for students and teachers alike—students are instructed in the general education setting, getting the support they need and teachers plan and teach together, ensuring a common understanding of the standard and varied approaches for meeting it. For more ideas about co-teaching, visit:

<http://www.edutopia.org/blog/collaborative-team-teaching-challenges-rewards-marisa-kaplan>

The inclusion of standards for speaking and listening provide an avenue for special needs students to demonstrate understanding of grade level material when dyslexia or other difficulties with composition present a barrier to expression. While the development of written communication skills is essential, teachers can honor both oral and written means of expression as they evaluate student learning, maintaining flexibility and an open focus to accommodate individual strengths and needs. To read more about evaluating students based on oral expression, see:

http://www.edweek.org/tm/articles/2012/04/02/fp_redford.html?tkn=MZXFIQOTJ0Wk88TtdPw1AxBahyGk3Dx3CBYx&

Differentiated instruction and Universal Design for Learning go hand in hand with one enabling the other. A UDL curriculum is designed to be innately flexible, offering a host of alternatives that can be specifically tailored to the needs of individuals. Students no longer need to adapt based on the limitations of the curriculum. With UDL, barriers to learning are minimized and students have full access to information and learning. Flexibility is key, offering teachers options in presentation and students options in expression and engagement.

For specific lesson examples using these combined techniques, see:

http://aim.cast.org/sites/aim.cast.org/files/DI_UDL.1.14.11.doc

The research on inclusion of special needs students in the general education setting features some compelling evidence of the its benefits, not only for those with special needs, but for their peers and teachers as well. Read more:

<http://www.iod.unh.edu/NCIE/Research%20on%20Inclusive%20Education.categories%20Fall%202011.pdf>



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